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William Blackstone

William Blackstone

IN HIS RELATION TO

MASSACHUSETTS

AND

RHODE ISLAND.

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> A gentleman that is very singular in behavior, but his singularities proceed from his good sense.—
> *Spectator.*

BY THE REV. B. F. DE COSTA.

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I.

WILLIAM BLACKSTONE:

The First Churchman of Boston, and the Founder of the City.

About the year 1624 the English explorer who chanced to land upon the peninsula where the city of Boston now stands must have encountered a phenomenon. Instead of being greeted by the painted savage, he was welcomed in familiar tones by a dignified and courteous individual in scholastic garb, whose language indicated liberal culture, as his sentiments testified to his generous humanity. Though nature reigned in primeval wildness, evidences of cultivation were not wanting, and upon the shelves of the little cottage to which the visitor was invited could be seen well-used tomes, recalling the studies of the university. Who, therefore, was this strange individual whose features united the lineaments of the contemplative recluse with those of good-fellowship and hospitality? This was none other than William Blaxton, or Blackstone, some time a student of

Emanuel, Cambridge, and now clerk in Holy Orders, sequestered in the wilderness of America.

How or when Blackstone reached New England is not known. It is certain, however, that he took his Master's degree in 1621, and that when he appeared in America he was still less than thirty years of age. Had he come over with Gorges in 1623, as Mr. Adams supposes, and identified himself with the hated colonists at Weymouth, he might not have trusted himself alone in immediate proximity to that place, as the savages would be thirsting for his blood. Besides, the Weymouth people had a clergyman with them, and would hardly desire another. The first mention of Blackstone is that of June 9th, 1628, when he was assessed twelve shillings towards the expence of arresting Morton of Merry Mount, though there is nothing to prove that he paid the tax or sympathized with the proceeding. Again, April 29th, 1629, he was empowered by Gorges to put Oldham in possession of lands near Boston, which has been accepted as proving that he was connected with the Weymouth colony; but it might be argued with equal force that he was connected with the colony at Dover, because a reference, hitherto unnoticed, mentions that, in 1631, he was empowered to perform a similar act for Hilton.

Whenever Blackstone may have come over, it is certain that his tastes were singular,

though he is by no means to be condemned for his singularity. A class of men may ever be ready to exclaim,

> "Oh, solitude, where are thy charms
> That sages have seen in thy face?"

and be unable to see with

> "——that inward eye
> Which is the bliss of solitude."

Yet Blackstone, as well as John Baptist, found life in the wilderness somewhat to his account.

There is no evidence that Blackstone had any white neighbors prior to 1629, but in that year Thomas Walford, a Churchman like himself, was living in a palisadoed house at Mishawumet, now Charlestown. Somewhat later another well-known Churchman, Samuel Maverick, lived at Noddle's Island, now East Boston. It is thus a curious fact that the three peninsulas mentioned, and which closely faced one another, commanding the water approaches, were taken possession of by Churchmen, and this, too, at a time when the nearest English habitations were those at Plymouth. Gorges, the proprietor, was himself a Churchman. Can it be claimed that this was done without any particular design?

In 1630, however, Blackstone's quiet was invaded, for at that time Governor Winthrop and his people had reached Mishawumet. But when the recluse saw how the new-comers suf-

fered from the poor water, he invited them to Shawmut, or Shawamet, a name, like that of Charlestown, signifying a landing-place. The manuscript records of Charlestown recite that "Mr. Blackstone, dwelling on the other side Charles River, alone, to a place by the Indeans called Shawmutt, where he only had a cottage at, not far off the place called Blackstone Point, he came and acquainted the Governor of an excellent spring there, withal inviting and soliciting him thither. Whereupon . . . the greatest part of the Church removed thither, whither also the frame of the Governor's house was carried, when the people began to build their houses against the winter. And this place," the recorder adds, "was called Boston," which, it may be remembered, was from Boston, or "Botolph," England. The colonists, who hated saint worship, thus put themselves under the guardianship of St. Botolph, whose bones were carried in procession at Bury when the people wanted rain.

Blackstone's cottage was on the river side of Boston, near the present terminus of the bridge connecting the ancient tri-mountain peninsula with Cambridge, and looking prophetically toward the spot where no mean reproduction of his own *alma mater* was soon to rise. Upon what ground he took possession of the peninsula does not appear. A speech is sometimes put into his mouth, declaring in high terms that while the Cabots

acquired the whole continent by sailing along the coast, he had won his title by actual occupancy. Since, however, this coasting voyage of the Cabots is about as apocryphal as the "Humors of Eutopia," in which the speech first appeared, we may dismiss both. The versatile Dr. Peters tells us that William Peters "had a deed of the whole peninsula whereon Boston stands, which he purchased of Mr. Blaxton, who bought it of the Plymouth Company" (p. 51). Governor Winthrop immediately set about the work of organization, and, September 7th, 1630, the Court of Assistants formally ordered that "Tri-mountain be called Boston." October 19th, William Blackstone was admitted a Freeman (Gen. Reg., III. 41), but the next May it was voted that only those should be Freemen who joined "the Church." Even Hutchinson (I. 256) confesses that this was a "most extraordinary law," and one which, if enacted by Parliament, might well have been "the first in the roll of grievances." Thus the people who, from the cabin of the "Arbella," sent such loving greetings to their "dear brethren" of the Church of England, soon discovered that even "dear brethren" had no rights of citizenship that they were bound to respect. The details of what followed are wanting, but in the end Blackstone found it convenient to leave. Johnson, however, in "Wonder-working Providence," gives a curious paragraph that throws light upon

the subject. Speaking of the distress that prevailed in 1629, he says: "All this while little likelihood there was of building the temple for God's worship, there being only two that began to hew stones in the mountains, the one named Mr. Bright and the other Mr. Blaxton, and one of them began to build; but when they saw all sorts of stones would not fit in the building, as they supposed, the one betook him to the Seas againe and the other to till the land, retaining no symbol of his former profession but a Canonicall Coate" (c. 9). Bright, it appears, was a clergyman of the Church of England, who had come out with the people, but was disliked, as Hubbard shows. Morton, in his Memorial (p. 93, ed. 1826), says distinctly that Bright "was a conformist." Evidently he had credited the people of the "Arbella" with sincerity when they declared that they were misjudged by those who said that they meditated separation. Bright came, like the Browns, expecting to enjoy a free Church in a free State. The Browns at Salem reproached Skelton and Higginson for their course, and were put on board a ship and sent home to England. Bright, however, was more careful, and came to Charlestown with a part of the company, evidently hoping to hold them somewhat to the Church. Mather says that Blackstone and Bright "began to hew," while Bright himself "began to build." His efforts, nev-

ertheless, proved in vain. He could not keep them to their promises, while Blackstone would not join "the Church." Later the people were confirmed in their judgment against conformity by a fact recorded by the governor, whose son, a magistrate, had a Greek Testament, the Psalms, and Common Prayer bound together and deposited in a corn-loft. The "thing worthy of observation was" that he "found the Common Prayer eaten with mice, every *leaf of it*, and not any of the two others *touched*, nor any other of his books, though there were above a thousand." Thus the fate of episcopacy in Boston was settled by misunderstood mice; for evidently, after all, these were wise rodents, who, not knowing the Greek, let it alone, intending, no doubt, to teach the separatists the importance of abstaining from meddling with matters which they did not understand.

Hubbard, speaking of Bright, says: "He, not unlike Jonah, fled from the presence of the Lord." Some have supposed that Johnson meant to say that Bright became a sailor, but this does not quite follow from his language. Finding a ship going to England, he "paid the fare thereof," and went home. Fleeing from the atmosphere of Separatism was fleeing from the presence of the Lord, and, upon the whole, a pretty neat deification of schism. Nevertheless, Mr. Bright's case shows what Churchmen should not forget—that the

settlement over which he was to have been placed as minister was originally intended for something better than separation, otherwise they would not have brought over a conforming clergyman.

The authority already quoted was of the opinion that Mr. Blackstone had a better faculty for tilling the ground "than in the things pertaining to the house of God." There is also a repetition of Johnson's slur at the "Canonicall Coate," it being added, "For any one to retain only the outward badge of his function, that could never pretend to any faculty therein or exercise thereof, is, though no honor to himself, yet a dishonor and disparagement to the order he would thereby challenge acquaintance with." This leads to the question, Why was Blackstone alone in the wilderness without the exercise of his profession? There was certainly no fault in his moral character that the unfriendly Hubbard could seize upon. Mather, in his "Magnalia," shows why he stood alone, for, after endorsing his character by placing him among those "godly Episcopalians" who adorned the Christian profession in New England, he says: "This man, indeed, was of a particular humor, and he would never join any of our Churches, giving this reason, 'I came from England because I did not like the *lord-bishops*, but I can't join with you, because I would be under the *lord-brethren*'" (III. c. 11). Blackstone was

in advance of his age. Within and without the Church he saw intolerance, and, feeling his inability to contend, he sought a home in the New World, whither he did not expect intolerance to follow. He was willing to be sequestered, if thereby he could maintain his consistency and independence. He also possessed a taste for the contemplative life, being in sympathy with those men and women lauded by Chrysostom, because out of their seclusion they lavished upon the world gifts more than regal. Nevertheless, he remained a Churchman. His Churchmanship was a matter of common report in Mather's day. With no reason whatsoever can the nonconformist deny his churchly character. He stood, as regards the high-handed tyranny of the lord-bishops, where every reasonable Churchman stands to-day. To avoid it he crossed the ocean and sought refuge among the cloisters of the New England forests, expecting to be as free from intrusion as within the groves of Emanuel. But, as it often happened with the ancient anchorite, the place of his seclusion became the seat of a great city. Like the Arab, he was crowded out by the guest he brought in.

Mather, though entertaining a fair estimate of the man, did not believe in his title to eminent domain, and observes that, "happening to sleep first in a hovel upon a point of land there [Boston], laid claim to all the

ground whereupon there now stands the metropolis of the whole English America." Nevertheless, Blackstone's claim was maintained until the inhabitants had been taxed six shillings apiece to buy his rights, though he still reserved six acres of ground for his own use. It has been doubted, however, whether Blackstone claimed the whole peninsula.

Blackstone remained at Boston about ten years. In 1641, when Lechford, a Churchman and the author of "Plain Dealing," was at Boston, he felt the inconvenience of his principles; and while there he wrote: "One Master *Blakeston*, a Minister, went from Boston, having lived there nine or ten years, because he would not join the Church," adding, "he lives neere Master [Roger] Williams, but is far from his opinions," as he well might be, since Williams held that it was "not lawful to heare any of the Ministers of the Parish Assemblies in England," otherwise, that it was sin. It was no doubt true that Blackstone left because he would not "join the Church." Without actually driving him out, they made it uncomfortable for him to stay.

Blackstone, like many another good man, appears to have been fond of cultivating fruits and flowers, and a writer in the Providence Gazette, supposed to be Stephen Hopkins, the Signer, says that he was in Boston "so long

as to have raised apple-trees and planted an orchard"; but "John Josselyn, Gent.," in his "Account of Two Voyages" (Printed for *Giles Widdows*, at the *Green Dragon*, in St. *Paul's* Church-yard, 1674), says that he had brought to him from Governor's Island, Boston Harbor, in 1638, "half a score of very fair Pippins," there being "not one Apple-tree nor Pear planted yet in no part of the Countrey but upon that island" (p. 29). This Josselyn, however, did not know a wasp's-nest, and went "to pluck it" for a "pine Apple," being so badly stung that they "hardly knew me but by my garments." Yet this same Josselyn professed to know "pippins." Let those Bostonians who are now vindicating to the Church principles of Blackstone see to it that they dispose of Josselyn's implied aspersion respecting the good man's apples.

The founder of Boston, whose two hundred and fiftieth anniversary has just been celebrated, acted fully upon the Kantian dogma, that education consists in the development of one's idiosyncracies; and Blackstone was clearly the father of his people. Yet his departure from the renowned bailiwick which owes him so much was equally satisfactory to the people and himself. Blackstone found the peninsula a wilderness, but left it a rising city. From the tax levied he received £30; but our excellent friend, though a man of peace, did not go before he had a case in court,

which, at Newton, April 7th, 1635, decreed that "Nahanton," his bronzed adversary, should "give two skins of beaver to Mr. Blackestone for damages done his swine by setting traps," etc. (Mass. Rec., I. 43).

Of his funds, tradition says that he invested £12 in cattle. Then, all his preparations being made, while the forests were still fragrant with the perfume of the trailing arbutus, our "godly Episcopalian," vested in that despised "canonicall coate," gathered up his loved books, and, in the company of his gentle-eyed, four-footed friends, southward took his solitary way.

What happened to him further will be told in another paper.

II.

WILLIAM BLACKSTONE:

The First Churchman in Rhode Island, and the Original Settler of the State.

We left our ancient worthy, the founder of Boston, travelling southward in the company of his four-footed companions, whom, after a varied experience, he doubtless regarded as his best friends. He now feels the old longing which originally helped to carry him over the sea:

> "O for a lodge in some vast wilderness,
> Some boundless contiguity of shade,
> Where rumor of oppression and deceit,
> Of unsuccessful or successful war,
> Might never reach me more."

At this time he found no difficulty in discovering what met his wants, as New England lay before him a vast, unexplored forest. Following the beaten Indian paths forming a network in the woods, Blackstone reached the territory of the State of Rhode Island, then visited occasionally by Dutch and English traders, but without a permanent white inhabitant.

Selecting lands in the present town of Cumberland, known as the "Attleborough Gore," he built a cottage. His house stood near the site of the bridge that now unites the village of Lonsdale. The Indian name of the place was Wawepoonseag, said to signify "the place where birds are snared," being also mentioned in 1661 as the place where "one Blackstone now sojourneth." His cottage stood at the foot of a hill which had three natural terraces, upon the second of which he dug his well; while the summit of the hill formed a place of retirement and study. His retreat was known as "Study Hill." In 1836 three apple-trees bearing fruit were standing on the south end of Blackstone's meadow, being then considered as having sprung from sprouts of those which he planted.

Of the progress of events at Study Hill it is impossible to speak. Blackstone, however, appears to have had his man Friday, whose surname was Abbott, who attended to his interests, and is duly immortalized by the name affixed to a locality now called "Abbott's Run." Yet in 1659 a radical change was made in the arrangements at Study Hill, for at that time our excellent recluse, though about threescore years old, saw that, after all, the daughters of Boston were fair, and took unto himself a helpmate in the person of Mistress Sarah Stevenson of that city, whom he there married July 4th. No less a magnate than

Endicott, Governor of Massachusetts, performed the ceremony, which took place five years before the time assigned by Drake as that when first "the Church service was performed in Boston without molestation," and seventeen years before the first Episcopal organization was attempted. Blackstone probably chose the services of the distinguished head of the Commonwealth in preference to those of "the Church" he would not "join." A recently discovered broadside shows that at this period he was accustomed to make occasional visits to Boston, riding on a bull, and the object of his pilgrimages may therefore be surmised. It cannot, however, be affirmed positively that the bride in going to Rhode Island travelled in the style of the lovely Europa.

It is evident that after his marriage Blackstone maintained his studious habits, and that, upon the top of his hill, he found opportunities for quiet contemplation which the little voice soon heard in his cottage did not always afford. It is likewise evident that he did not aim seriously at the accumulation of this world's goods. Forty years of labor at Study Hill increased his personal estate only by that number of pounds. His wife's son, John Stevenson, is described as kind and dutiful; while his own tastes were simple, and rendered him so independent that his mental tranquillity was not disturbed by the lean larder.

According to the records of Rehoboth, Mrs. Blackstone died in the middle of 1673; while the venerable man himself passed from earth May 26th, 1675, being more than fourscore years old. Baylies wrote: "In his death this pilgrim of Boston was singularly happy, as it happened a few days before the commencement of that direful war . . . which gave his house and his books to the flames, and rendered his fair and cultivated domain a scene of destruction. His house appears to have been destroyed with the seven houses mentioned by Hubbard in his 'Indian Wars.' Blackstone himself never had any trouble with the savages." Plymouth records contain an inventory of his effects, which gives the contents of his library:

	£ s. d.
3 Bibles, 10s.—6 English books in folio, £2	2 10
3 Latin books in folio, 15s.—3 Latin books in large quarto, £2	2 15
15 Small quarto, £1 17s. 6d.—14 small quarto, 14s	2 11 6
30 Large octavo, £4—25 small octavo, £1 5s	5 5
22 Duodecimo	1 13
53 Small duodecimo, of little value	13
10 Paper books	5
	15 12 6

His personal estate was only £40, which shows a handsome proportion for his books. Those "paper books" probably contained important passages in New England History. His family eventually disappeared from Rhode Island, and it was taken for granted that it

became extinct. His "daughter" was never anything more than a myth, while it is not yet certain that any grandson was "killed at Louisburg." His son John, however, became dissipated, and, in 1713, was legally warned out of the town of Attleborough; having previously, in 1692, deeded his patrimony to David Whipple, signing the deed as "John Blaxton." Tradition runs that Blackstone detected the tendencies of his son, and observed sadly that Solomon was mistaken when he said that a man could not know whether his inheritance would descend to a wise man or a fool. Yet recent investigations have proved that the son was wiser than the father supposed, and that after sowing his wild oats he reformed and became a respectable member of society. The name of Blackstone is still preserved by his lineal descendants in Connecticut, who, from the settlement of John at Branford, have grown in public estimation and have done honor to the name, showing that good blood will tell.

We must, of course, inquire here in relation to his ecclesiastical status at this period. Fortunately we are not left altogether in the dark, for Stephen Hopkins, whose grandfather was one of the original settlers of Providence, recorded in The Gazette printed there in 1765 that "Mr. Blackstone used frequently to come to Providence to preach the Gospel." It would also appear that this took place

"when he was old." Blackstone could not have officiated for Roger Williams' flock, as in their eyes episcopacy was a sore evil. Lechford, it will be remembered, says that Blackstone, though "neere Master Williams," was "far from his opinions." In 1649 Cromwell's "Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in New England" was flooding the country with nonconformists, while in 1680 the Bishop of London reported only four clergy of the Establishment in America. The Church Propagation Society was not established until 1701. In 1640 Gibson was engaged in establishing St. John's, Portsmouth, New Hampshire. Blackstone was essentially alone, and probably without any connection with Churchmen at a distance.

The historian of Providence could find no trace of "Episcopalianism" there prior to 1722, and though Lockyer was missionary in Newport in 1698, and Honyman evidently held services at Providence in 1704, McSparran, writing in 1753, claims that he was "the first Episcopal minister that ever preached at Providence." At the time he wrote he could not have read the testimony of Hopkins as it was printed in 1765, but the author of "The Annals of Providence" might have taken the narrative of The Gazette into the account when writing the history of "St. John's church," or at least have allowed the name of Blackstone to appear. The same fault is to be found with

the bulky volume of Rhode Island ecclesiastical history, prepared in accordance with a vote of convention, 1840, Dr. Francis Vinton being chairman; but though one searches the five hundred and thirty-three pages in vain to discover some reference to William Blackstone, there is nevertheless a very neat notice of the Narragansett pacing horse.

Blackstone was unfitted to battle with the world, and occupied an isolated position; yet it is probable that from near the time of Roger Williams' advent at Providence there were always Churchmen there, where worship was free, and that the frequent preaching tours made to Providence had the interest of the English Church for their object. There is no evidence whatsoever that Blackstone was a nonconformist or a friend of Roger Williams, while he was always recognized as an "Episcopalian"; the neglect of the man on the part of Churchmen being simply the result of unacquaintance. It is also probable that he performed the services of the Church at "Study Hill," in the vicinity of which, at the time of his death, there were one hundred and sixty inhabitants. Hopkins describes him as an "exemplary Christian."

Heath says that in Rhode Island, as in Massachusetts, he was the first to plant an orchard and raise apples; and since, in Blackstone's visits to Providence, "to encourage his young hearers, he gave them the first apples they ever

saw," and since, moreover, the said apples were "yellow sweetings," the "richest and most delicious of the whole kind," it is quite certain that the venerable missionary was popular with the young. Possibly, too, they were edified by his style of travelling, for Hopkins says that "when he was old and unable to travel on foot, he used to ride on a bull trained and tutored to that use." Coming thus, with his saddle-bags full of "sweetings," and prepared by large knowledge and experience to add apples of gold in pictures of silver, he must have been welcome indeed. The sight might not have pleased the imperious Laud, yet there was something classic in the spectacle, while it would have appealed to the instincts of the historian of the "Narragansett pacer," and, no doubt, secured an appreciative paragraph. We may imagine the children attending the patriarch, as they flocked around Goldsmith's parson—plucking his gown, or at least that "canonicall coate," to catch the good man's smile. Indeed, it is Blackstone's unmistakable love of children, as well as his devotion to fruits, flowers, and the trees of the Lord, which give our best impressions of this gentle and benignant disciple, who, cast in the mould of St. John, was ready to receive the kingdom of heaven as a little child.

The ashes of Blackstone repose to-day, with those of his wife, at the foot of the slope of "Study Hill," where, in 1836, two rude stones

marked the grave. They marked the grave of a Churchman to whose memory no monument has yet been built, as well as the grave of the founder of Boston, and one might say the founder of Rhode Island, since about one year in advance of Roger Williams, and Coddington the founder of Providence, Blackstone laid the corner-stone of Christian civilization on the Attleborough Gore.

Blackstone was no ordinary man. The glimpses that we have of his character prove that he possessed qualifications which, under other circumstances, might have made him one of the foremost men of New England. His motto was "Toleration"; the thought being held in a lofty sense that never dawned upon the vision of Roger Williams. He appears every way superior to the times, and stands like some tall rock in the sea whose summit is bathed in untroubled light, while tumultuous waves beat below. At a later period he would have been the friend and co-laborer of Berkeley, and together they might have pursued the paths of contemplative philosophy, and labored to lay foundations for education and the Church.

At Study Hill may still be seen a venerable tree that a well-known though eccentric clergyman named "the Catholic Oak," dedicating it to "Universal Toleration," several times holding divine service under its branches, employing the venerable forms loved by Black-

stone so well. No appropriate monument, however, has yet been set up. Rhode Island, nevertheless, will yet honor the founder of the first Christian home within her border, while Boston will also pay with interest the great debt which, according to her historian, she owes to that "memorable man."

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